

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 130.

Last time, we left Zhuge Liang in a bit of a pickle. He was garrisoned inside a small town called Lucheng (3,2), while his opponent Sima Yi had sent an army to attack the Saber Pass, which would cut off Zhuge Liang's path of retreat and his supply route. Meanwhile, Sima Yi was coming to attack Lucheng (3,2) in person. What's more, all this was happening at a time when Zhuge Liang was just about to rotate his field army off the front lines in exchange for fresh reserves.

Zhuge Liang's adviser Yang (2) Yi (2) now suggested that he should keep his field army right where it was until the crisis had passed. But Zhuge Liang disagreed.

"We cannot do that," he said. "I have always based my authority on being a man of my words. Since I have already given the order for the men to be rotated off the front, how can I go back on it? Besides, the men who are due to rotate off have been looking forward to going home, and their families are eagerly awaiting them. Even if I am facing a calamity, I will not keep them."

So Zhuge Liang sent out word that the troops were to rotate off as planned and they were to leave that day. But when the rank-and-file heard what he had said, they all shouted, "Your excellency is so kind and considerate! We are willing to postpone our departure and put our lives on the line to crush the enemy and repay you!"

Zhuge Liang tried to convince the men to leave, but they steadfastly refused and insisted on going out to fight. So Zhuge Liang told them, "Since you insist on following me into battle, then let's set up camp outside the town. When the enemy arrives, pounce on them before they can catch their breath. We will be rested while they toil."

The soldiers were delighted and they all grabbed their weapons and flooded outside the city to line up and wait. When the Wei army arrived outside the city, its troops were exhausted from the march and were just about to pitch camp and rest. But the Shu forces poured into them and sent them scurrying.

While the Wei forces ran, the Shu army gave chase and left in their wake a field littered with the bodies of the enemy's dead and rivers of blood.

Zhuge Liang now summoned his victorious troops back into the town and rewarded them. But just as the celebration was getting underway, an urgent dispatch arrived from Li (3) Yan (2), a very high-ranking Shu official who was presently overseeing the key city of Baidi (2,4), which served as a check on the frenemy kingdom of Dongwu. Given the strategic importance of Li Yan's location, Zhuge Liang was naturally alarmed at this urgent message and quickly opened it.

The report said, "I have recently found out that Dongwu has sent an envoy to the Wei capital Luoyang to forge an alliance with Wei. Wei has ordered Dongwu to conquer our kingdom. Fortunately, Dongwu has not yet mobilized its forces. I am informing your excellency so that you can draw up a plan quickly."

Zhuge Liang decided that he must return at once to deal with this potential crisis, so he ordered all the forces stationed at the base camp at Qi Mountain to fall back into the Riverlands while he kept his army right where it was in order to prevent Sima Yi from giving chase.

So the Shu forces soon embarked on a methodical retreat. This did not escape the notice of the Wei general Zhang He. Now Zhang He had fallen into enough of Zhuge Liang's traps that he knew better than to charge headlong in pursuit. Instead, he led his troops to go see Sima Yi and asked him what he thought.

"Zhuge Liang is crafty," Sima Yi said. "We cannot make rash moves. Let's fortify our defenses. Once his provisions run out, he will naturally fall back."

Now, some of Sima Yi's men disagreed with this, thinking it was cowardly. But Sima Yi was like, guys, did you already forget what happened in the last episode? Did you forget how you all wanted to give chase and ended up falling into a trap and I had to chew you out? So no, we are just going to stay RIGHT HERE.

On the other side, now that the Shu army at base camp had retreated, Zhuge Liang summoned the adviser Yang Yi and the general Ma Zhong and gave them secret instructions. He ordered them to lead 10,000 archers to go set up an ambush around the entrance to the Saber Pass. He then ordered the generals Wei Yan and Guan Xing to bring up the rear as his army fell back. He then set up a bunch of banners around the top of the town's walls and kept some fires going inside the town to keep up appearances while his army began to retreat toward the Saber Pass.

These movements were soon detected by enemy scouts, who told Sima Yi, "The main Shu army has fallen back, but we don't know how big a force is still left inside the town."

So Sima Yi personally went to take a look. When he saw the banners atop the wall and the smoke coming from inside the town, he laughed and said, "The town must be empty."

So the scouts went to check it out, and sure enough, they reported back that the town was indeed abandoned.

"Zhuge Liang has retreated," Sima Yi said with delight. "Who dares to give chase?"

The general Zhang He immediately volunteered, but Sima Yi told him no.

"Sir, you are too impatient. You cannot go," he said to Zhang He.

But Zhang He countered, "Commander, when you set out on this mission, you named me your vanguard. So why do you refuse me now, when it is the time to claim glory?"

"The enemy must have an ambush to cover their retreat," Sima Yi explained. "Whoever gives chase must be very careful and attentive to details."

"I know, I know," Zhang He retorted. "No need to worry."

So Sima Yi relented, but he warned Zhang He, "If you insist on going, then you cannot have regrets later."

"A true man will never regret sacrificing himself for the country!" Zhang He assured him.

So Sima Yi now sent Zhang He on ahead with 5,000 men and then ordered another officer to follow with 20,000 so as to guard against an ambush. Sima Yi himself would lead 3,000 men to serve as the backup for the backup.

So Zhang He now set out at full speed to chase down Zhuge Liang. After about 10 miles, he suddenly heard loud cries from behind. From the woods darted out a detachment of enemy soldiers, led by a general who wielded a saber and shouted from his horse, "Rebel, where are you going?!"

This was the Shu general Wei Yan. Zhang He was itching for a fight, so he quickly turned and traded blows with Wei Yan. But after less than 10 bouts, Wei Yan turned and fled. Zhang He gave chase for another 10 miles before it suddenly occurred to him that, oh yeah, I'm supposed to watch out for an ambush. So he reined in his horse and looked around. He saw no ambush at all, so he resumed his chase.

No sooner had he gone around a hill did another enemy army appear, this one led by the general Guan Xing. Zhang He took him on as well, and within 10 bouts, Guan Xing turned and fled, and Zhang He gave chase. The pursuit led Zhang He into a thickly wooded area, and he quickly became suspicious, so he held up and ordered his men to scout out the area. But they found no sign of any ambush, so Zhang He resumed his chase again.

He had not gone far when he spotted none other than Wei Yan waiting up ahead. So they fought for another 10 bouts, and Wei Yan once again turned and fled. Zhang He was now raging mad and gave chase again. But he now his way blocked by Guan Xing, who also fought him for 10 bouts.

So this went on and on. Wei Yan and Guan Xing took turns fighting Zhang He, while the Shu soldiers ditched their clothing, armor, and other belongings along the way as they fled. Seeing all this loot lying around, the Wei soldiers now got off their horses and started squabbling over the booty. Really, guys? Are you really that dense? Have you not seen enough of Zhuge Liang's tricks to spot one from a mile away?

Anyway, this continued until dusk. In the dying daylight, the Shu army and their Wei pursuers arrived at the entrance to the Saber Pass. Wei Yan now reined in his horse, turned around, and cursed at Zhang He.

“Zhang He, you rebel! I didn’t want to fight you, but you kept chasing me. Let’s have it out right here!”

Zhang He was like, yeah, that’s what I’ve been waiting for. Bring it! So the two tangled again. But once again, after less than 10 bouts, Wei Yan turned and fled, abandoning his armor, helmet, and horse, while fleeing with his soldiers along the Saber Pass. Zhang He sure as heck wasn’t going to stop now, so he galloped after them as night fell.

Suddenly, an explosive sounded, and the hillside was lit up with torches as giant boulders and logs tumbled down the hill and blocked Zhang He’s path forward.

“It’s a trap!” Zhang He said with alarm. Just as he turned to fall back, he saw that the path of retreat was now also blocked by boulders and logs. What’s more, on his left and right were sheer cliffsides, so there was nowhere for him to go. Just then, another signal sounded, and the 10,000 archers who had been lying in wait now fired. Poor Zhang He and the 100-some men with him were soon reduced to corpses strewn along the Saber Pass. So you can now mark off the last of the great generals who served under Cao Cao.

Shortly after Zhang He met his end, the first wave of backup Wei forces arrived. When they saw the path ahead blocked, they knew that Zhang He had fallen for a trap. They were just about to head back when a loud shout came from the top of a nearby hill. “Prime minister Zhuge Liang is here!”

They looked up and saw Zhuge Liang standing amid the torches. He pointed at them and said, “I was hunting today. I was looking to shoot a horse, but shot deer by mistake. You all can go back without worry. Go tell Sima Yi that he will be my prisoner sooner or later.”

And by the way, Zhuge Liang was doing a little play on word there in saying that he was hunting for a horse. The character Ma in Sima Yi is the character for horse. Anyway, the Wei troops returned to camp and told Sima Yi what happened, and he was extremely grieved. Looking skyward, he lamented, "General Zhang's death is my fault!"

Having suffered another setback, but also having once again turned away Zhuge Liang's invasion, Sima Yi now took his army back to the capital Luoyang. When the Wei emperor Cao Rui heard about Zhang He's death, he too was greatly saddened and ordered up a fancy funeral for the great warrior.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang returned to his base in Hanzhong and was preparing to go to the Shu capital Chengdu to discuss the crisis on the southeastern borders with his emperor. But something fishy was going on. Li Yan, the senior official whose urgent letter had brought Zhuge Liang back from the front, now wrote to the emperor and said, "Your servant has already prepared all the provisions and was about to send them to the prime minister on the front. But for some unknown reason, his excellency has fallen back."

Uhh, what the heck was this Li Yan doing? The Shu emperor Liu Shan (4) now sent the court official Fei (4) Yi (1) to see Zhuge Liang to ask him why he had returned. Zhuge Liang was stunned by that question.

"Li Yan wrote me an urgent letter saying Dongwu was about to invade the Riverlands. That's why I came back," he told Fei Yi.

"But Li Yan told his majesty that all the provisions were ready to go to the front and that your excellency had returned without cause," Fei Yi said. "That's why his majesty sent me to ask you about this."

Zhuce Liang was in no mood for shenanigans. I mean, guys, I've done this Northern expedition thing FIVE frickin' times. I so do not have time to play games with you. So he looked into this matter, and

discovered that Li Yan was actually behind schedule on getting the provisions ready. He was afraid that Zhuge Liang would punish him because, hey remember when Zhuge Liang wanted to execute Li Yan's subordinate in the last episode for being late with a shipment of grain? So to cover his rear, Li Yan made up the whole thing about Dongwu invading so as to bring Zhuge Liang back from the front and then lied to the emperor. Now, for some reason, he thought that he could get away with this, that Zhuge Liang would somehow not figure out what happened when he came back and found no invasion plans by Dongwu. Well, Zhuge Liang found out, and he was furious.

"That scoundrel has single-handedly wrecked an important matter of state!" Zhuge Liang said.

He immediately summoned Li Yan, with the intention of putting him to death. But Fei Yi preached leniency.

"Li Yan was one of the officials entrusted by the First Emperor with helping to manage the kingdom," Fei Yi said. "I hope your excellency can go easy on him on account of that."

Now, I'm not sure why that would be a good reason for leniency. If anything, breaking the trust that your dead former lord had placed in you would seem to be a check in the "off with his head" column. But Zhuge Liang did relent. But when Fei Yi returned to the capital and told the emperor Liu Shan the truth, Liu Shan was equally enraged and called for the guards to execute Li Yan at once.

The senior official Jiang (2) Wan (3) now stepped in and begged for leniency because, you know, First Emperor and all that. And Liu Shan, like Zhuge Liang, relented and instead settled for stripping Li Yan of his rank and put him under house arrest in exile away from the capital.

But, there's an interesting prologue to this little episode. When Zhuge Liang returned to the capital, he appointed Li Yan's son, Li Feng (1), as an adviser. Now, remember that back in episode 123, when Zhuge Liang was about to execute the adviser Ma Su for his failure, Ma Su asked Zhuge Liang to follow the example of the ancient sage king Shun (4) and take care of his son. King Shun, if you remember, had executed a man for failing to get a handle of the floods that plagued the country, but then he put that

man's son, Yü (2), in charge of the project, and Yü threw himself into the job, learned from his father's mistake, and succeeded. So by using Li Yan's son, Zhuge Liang was following the model laid out by that legend.

Anyway, having yet another Northern campaign short-circuited through no fault of his own, Zhuge Liang now began preparing for another expedition. He set himself to stockpiling provisions, studying military tactics, organizing weapons and equipment, and taking care of the troops, with an eye toward another Northern campaign in three years. Meanwhile, both his soldiers and the people of the Riverlands appreciated his virtuous and compassionate administration of the state.

Now, usually in the novel, this is where we jump off to another kingdom to see what's going on there. But nope, not this time. The novel just skips ahead and says, three years passed. So we're now in the 12th month of the year 234, and Zhuge Liang went to court and said to the emperor Liu Shan, "I have been grooming the army for three years. Now, our provisions are plentiful, our weapons and equipment are ready, and our men and horses are strong. We can attack Wei again. If your servant cannot exterminate the rebels and reclaim the Heartlands this time, I swear I will not face your highness!"

But Liu Shan did not share his prime minister's zeal.

"Right now, we are in a stable world with three states," he said. "Neither the kingdom of Wu nor Wei has encroached on our borders. Minister father, why don't you just enjoy the peace?"

"Because of the First Emperor's great kindness to me, I have spent every waking moment planning for the invasion of Wei," Zhuge Liang said. "It is my wish to pour all my strength into helping your highness reclaim the Heartlands and reinvigorate the House of Han."

But Zhuge Liang had barely finished speaking when another man stepped forward and said, "Your excellency cannot go on a campaign."



So this man was named Qiao (2) Zhou (1), and we've met him before. He was one of the holdovers from the court of the previous regime that ruled the Riverlands before Liu Bei took it over. He was now the court historian, and he was a skilled reader of the stars. He now continued:

"It is my duty to observe the heavens, and I must report what I see honestly, whether good or ill. Recently, tens of thousands of birds flocked from the South and drowned themselves in the Han (4) River. That is a bad omen. Also, the pattern of the night sky indicates that the aura of the North is strong, so it is not favorable for an invasion. Also, the people of the capital have heard the cypress trees weeping at night. With all these unlucky signs, your excellency should just stay on the defensive and take no rash actions."

But Zhuge Liang was having none of this.

"I was entrusted with a great responsibility by the First Emperor, so I must do all I can to exterminate the rebels. How can I abandon the important affairs of the state because of some meaningless signs?"

So the Northern expedition was on once again. We're now on No. 6, for those of you keeping count. But before he set out this time, Zhuge Liang went to Liu Bei's temple and offered a sacrifice to ask for some divine assistance. In front of the altar, he wept and prayed to Liu Bei's spirit.

"Your servant, Zhuge Liang, has yet to gain an inch of territory on five expeditions from Qi Mountain. This is a great offense! Now, I am mobilizing the troops and marching out from Qi Mountain once again. I swear to pour my heart and soul into exterminating the rebels and reclaiming the Heartlands. For the rest of my days, I shall toil ceaselessly until I am no more!"

After this ceremony, Zhuge Liang took his leave of the emperor and headed to his base in Hanzhong, where he assembled his officers to discuss the new invasion. Suddenly, word arrived that the general

Guan Xing had died from illness. This shocking blow made Zhuge Liang wail, and he soon passed out. When he came to, his officers all tried to console him.

“[Sigh] Pity that heaven refuses to grant longevity to those who are loyal and honorable,” Zhuge Liang lamented. “And now I am down another top general for my campaign.”

So boy this campaign is sure getting off on a down note. But still, Zhuge Liang pressed on, heavy heart notwithstanding. He mobilized 340,000 men and marched them out in five detachments. The generals Jiang Wei and Wei Yan led the vanguard, and they headed for -- where else? -- Qi Mountain. He also ordered the officer Li Hui (1) to move the provisions ahead first and have it waiting for the army at the mouth of Xie (2) Gorge.

Word of this latest invasion soon reached the Wei capital Luoyang, and the Wei emperor Cao Rui hurriedly summoned Sma Yi. But really, Cao Rui should be old hand at this by now.

“The Shu had not encroached on our borders for three years, but now Zhuge Liang has once again marched out from Qi Mountain. What should we do?” Cao Rui asked.

Sima Yi replied, “Your servant was observing the night sky and saw that the aura of the Heartlands was strong and that the patterns of the stars did not favor the Riverlands. Zhuge Liang is going against heaven on the strength of his own talent. He is begging for defeat and destruction. With your blessings, I will go defeat him. I would also like to recommend four people to assist me.”

So the four people that Sima Yi recommended were all sons of Xiahou Yuan, who, if you remember, was one of Cao Cao’s kinsmen and top generals before he was killed during the war for Hanzhong. So these four sons were, from eldest to youngest, named Xiahou Ba (4), Xiahou Wei (1), Xiahou Hui (4), and Xiahou He (2). The two elder sons, Xiahou Ba (4) and Xiahou Wei (1) were warriors, while the younger two sons were learned men. Sima Yi now recommended the two elder sons as his vanguard generals, and the two younger sons as his advisers.

But Cao Rui wasn't so sure about these guys. After all, way back during Zhuge Liang's first Northern expedition, Cao Rui had sent another son of Xiahou Yuan, the prince consort Xiahou Mao (4) to lead the defense of the kingdom, and Xiahou Mao (4) did such a horrible job that he suffered heavy casualties and was so ashamed that he just stayed in the borderlands instead of returning to the capital. So understandably, Cao Rui was not so sure about the abilities of Xiahou Mao's brothers.

Sima Yi, however, assured him that these four guys were nothing like their no-good, no-talent brother. Cao Rui was like, ok, I guess you know what you're doing. So he appointed Sima Yi as the supreme commander of all the armies. As Sima Yi was leaving, Cao Rui gave him a handwritten decree that said, "When you arrive at the River Wei, fortify your defenses and refrain from engaging the enemy. When the Shu forces are denied the battle they seek, they will no doubt pretend to retreat to try to lure you out. Be careful and do not give chase. Once the enemy's provisions run out, they will leave. Then you can attack them, and it will not be hard to attain victory. It will also spare our troops of toil. There is no better plan."

So Sima Yi set out and went to the city of Chang'an, where he assembled 400,000 men and marched them to the shore of the Wei River. After pitching camp, he dispatched 50,000 men to go upriver and build 9 pontoon bridges. He then sent his vanguard generals Xiahou Ba (4) and Xiahou Wei (1) to cross over to the other side and set up camp. Finally, he built a fortress on the eastern plains, which lay behind his main camp, just in case the Shu forces tried to come at him from that direction.

This done, Sima Yi began to discuss his plans with his officers. Just then, the generals Guo Huai and Sun Li (3) came to see him. Guo Huai told Sima Yi that the Shu army was camped at Qi Mountain and that if they were to cross the river, ascend the plains, and extend their lines to the northern hills, they would be trouble. So Sima Yi told them to go pitch camp on the northern plain and set up strong defenses so that they could hold out until the Shu army ran out of provisions.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang had set up five large camps at Qi Mountain. He also built a string of 14 large camps between Xie Gorge and the Saber Pass. So he was settling in for the long haul. One day, his scouts reported that the Wei generals Guo Huai and Sun Li had set up camp on the northern plain. Zhuge Liang immediately assembled his staff and told them,

“The enemy is pitching camp on the northern plain because they’re worried we will take that route and cut off the key road to the region of Longxi (3,1). I will feign an attack on the northern plain while launching a sneak attack on the Wei River. Have the men build a hundred rafts, load them with torches, and assign 5,000 seasoned sailors. When I launch a night attack on the northern plain, Sima Yi will no doubt lead his army there. If the enemy gives way at all, I will ferry my rear column across the river. The front column will then get on the rafts. Without setting foot on shore, they will sail along the river and burn the enemy’s pontoon bridges and attack their rear. Meanwhile, I will lead an army to attack the front gate of their camp. If we can capture the south bank of the Wei River, it will be easy to advance our troops.

While the Shu officers were busy preparing to carry out Zhuge Liang’s plan, Wei scouts reported their movements to Sima Yi. Sima Yi told his officers, “Zhuge Liang is up to something. He must be pretending to attack the northern plain. In actuality, he will be coming to burn our pontoon bridges. He is trying to disrupt our rear while launching a real attack on our front.”

So wow, Sima Yi just totally called Zhuge Liang on his deception. So how will Sima Yi counter this scheme? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast.

Thanks for listening!